

A Lesson in Interpretation

A recent informal Bible study session illustrates the value of Christians coming together to dig into—and unlock—the truths hidden within God’s word.

“If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution” (Ex. 22:2-3).



Every Tuesday morning, several men from our congregation meet at a local cafeteria for breakfast and a Bible study. In our last meeting, while working our way through the book of Exodus, we spent a considerable amount of time trying to decipher the meaning of this text. What does the phrase, “if the sun has risen on him” refer to?

None of us do any advance prep for these studies, and we have no commentaries handy to guide us. So as usual, we were on our own trying to figure out this riddle.

Perhaps it refers to a burglary gone bad, in which the thief kills the homeowner and is later apprehended for the murder. In that case, he gets the death sentence. Could “the sun rising on him” refer to his foul deed being brought to light?

Or maybe it’s describing a thief who is a little slow at his job and is still in the house at daybreak. But what is the “bloodshed” that is involved in that case?

After several minutes of wrestling with various ideas, it finally dawned on us (so to speak) that this verse is referring to *the timing of the confrontation*. Most thieves do their thieving at night, under the cover of darkness, to minimize the chances of getting caught. In that scenario, a thief who is apprehended in the act is more likely to be attacked and killed by the homeowner, who has no idea if he is dealing with a petty thief or an assassin. The homeowner cannot be held liable for the death of the intruder.

But if the thief makes a clean getaway and is *later* apprehended with the loot—“when the sun has risen on him”—he cannot be killed for his crime. He must pay restitution, of course, but since there is no longer any threat of violent harm, the owner cannot kill the thief without incurring guilt for his act of unreasonable vengeance. Once we hit on that interpretation, the passage made perfect sense. This text provides a practical lesson regarding the *punishment* for a crime fitting the *circumstances* of the crime, a principle that still undergirds our modern criminal justice system.

It was a great exercise in exegesis, but I’d like to use this group discussion experience to consider some deeper lessons about how we approach our study of the Bible.

First, it underscores the importance of having an open mind when we study God’s word. The Bible is a complex book covering a deep subject, so we mustn’t expect understanding to come quickly. The wise student will tread cautiously, remaining open to competing insights through a long process of study.

Second, it illustrates the value of studying the Scriptures with others. It was fellow believers kicking around ideas in a relaxed atmosphere, without belittling or criticizing, that allowed a better understanding of the passage to evolve. Private Bible study is useful, but we should also schedule opportunities to meet with other Christians to just read and talk about the Bible. We can learn so much from these unscripted free-form discussions.

Finally, this experience reinforces the fact that God’s word makes a lot of sense—once we understand it. Ancient cultural customs and archaic wording may obscure the meaning, but once it gets sorted out, the wisdom of God’s teaching shines like a beacon in a dark world. There’s treasure buried in these old books, but we must dig to find it. And it’s so worth the trouble once we find it.

— David King